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AUTHOR Sledd, James  
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## ABSTRACT

Teachers should first realize that their assigned role (according to society's decision-makers) is to produce a brainwashed work force which does not question the prevailing culture. Then they should take action to reject this role. As Michael Holzman put it, "We should stop doing harm if we can help it." Many "compositionists" favor this assigned role and so help to maintain the present system of domination and exploitation. "Democracy through Language," the slogan of the English Coalition Conference of July, 1987, suggests that mere talk can accomplish the transfer of power from the dominant minority to the dominated majority. A similarly futile conference planned by the Modern Language Association has defined literacy as the individual's ability to use language to become "...an active participant in all forms of public discourse," a state which could only be attained by means of drastic changes in our society. E. D. Hirsch's best-seller "Cultural Literacy" limits and trivializes the education of the young and diverts attention from genuine social needs. Ken Bruffee seems to hope that by changing his students' language he can change their deepest beings, all to satisfy the demands of those in power. Hope for change lies in the existence of thousands of devoted teachers. Their concerted action could break the prevailing system of exploitation, leading the way to a humanely employed literacy education. (MHC)

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rie in the Sky; or, Teaching New Paradigms Old Tricks

By James Sledd

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Because one has to submit an abstract to get a place on a 4Cs program, I dutifully submitted an abstract of my proposed paper. It was a fairly smart-ass performance, and ended like this: "Dominant professional attitudes guarantee that the Profession cannot contribute to significant social change but helps instead to maintain the present unjust system of dominance and submission."

Of course, my plans changed as I read and wrote, so that my abstract may have misled anyone who read it. I did, however, follow its general direction, and my paper remains a retrospective sermon to myself, unfortunately delivered much too late. The best part of it may be the epigraph, which I take from an opinion piece by Michael Holzman in College English for January, 1986: "We should stop doing harm if we can help it." The same issue of College English contains an egregiously harmful statement by Kenneth Bruffee: "The purpose of education--hence the job teachers are hired to do--is to induct people into the mores and values of the 'state,' that is, the prevailing culture." Both in my abstract and in my paper as I have actually written it, my most wishful thought has been to inoculate, if I can, against the contagion of that diseased, prevailing culture.

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But to get on with business: "We should stop doing harm if we can help it."

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The function of state-supported education, as the decision-makers define it, is double: (a) to provide such know-how as will supply employers with the sort of "work force" from whose labor the employers can extract their profits, and (b) to brainwash the young so that they will never question a brutal system of domination and exploitation.' A good beginning for a teacher (it took me fifty years) is just to understand that assigned role. Once we have understood it, we should spit on it.'

I can refresh the understanding of our assigned role with a few recent examples. The first is the English Coalition Conference, which went on for some three weeks last July at Wye Plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It was a big shindig, compared by its planners to the Basic Issues Conference of the 50s and the Dartmouth Conference of the 60s. Money from three foundations and the NEH allowed some sixty representatives of eight national associations to discover, on the last day of their meeting, that their theme had been "Democracy through Language."

That mindless slogan supports Mr. Secretary Bennett's nonsensical assertion that Americans of all classes and races deeply believe in "such principles as

justice, liberty, government with the consent of the governed, and equality under the law" (To Reclaim a Legacy, 30). It also suggests that mere talk can accomplish the transfer of power from the dominant minority, who have proved their unconcern for the principles that Bennett prates about, to the dominated majority, who demonstrate their understanding of "government with the consent of the governed" by refusing, in large numbers, to vote on election day. Talk about "Democracy through Language" makes English teachers feel important but diverts attention from the revolutionary action which would be necessary to make the United States a democratic nation. That is why big foundations happily sponsor exercises in covert obstructionism like the English Coalition Conference.

A conference which promises similar futility will be held next September in Columbus, Ohio, under the sponsorship of the MLA, Ohio State, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Its theme, "the right to literacy," has already been invented, and its planners have defined literacy "as the ability to use language in order to become an active participant in all forms of public discourse" (PMLA, October 1987, 884).

I seriously question whether, by that definition, any literates exist, even in the MLA. Skilled use of language won't make anybody "an active participant

in all forms of public discourse." The high jinks in the Reagan administration have proved again that in the most powerful nation in the undeniably Free World, a great deal of the most important public discourse is kept studiously private. Even if that were not so, one would have to ask what changes in our society would be necessary just to help every young citizen to general competence in our standard language. What would have to be done to make a right to literacy real?

Plainly, all the high-sounding talk will remain just talk unless and until the talkers become "active participants"--in social revolution. Without the most drastic changes in "the American way," the talkers give only the damaging illusion that people of good will are doing all that can be done and that those who remain illiterate even after such benevolent ministrations are undoubtedly themselves to blame. Has not E. D. Hirsch assured us that the construction of the little red schoolhouse made education universal in the U. S. A.?

The name of Hirsch brings me to my third example of the active discharge of our real function, the training of the work force and the brainwashing of the young. Cultural Literacy is a best-seller, and the MLA intends to devote Profession 88 to essays about Hirsch and Allan Bloom, who contributes to the

closing of the American mind by teaching "moderation and resignation" (381).

Bloom concerns himself with "the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities," those students (as Bloom sees them) "who are most likely . . . to have the greatest moral and intellectual effect on the nation" (22). He is the subject for another essay; but my oldest son and I have showed, in a paper for which we expect to find no publisher, that E. D. Hirsch in Cultural Literacy proposes to preserve the Union by the power of a mulish American hybrid begotten on a small dictionary by a folksy encyclopedia. Hirsch misrepresents his sources, sprinkles his pages with contradictions and non sequiturs, constantly makes unsupported assertions and false promises, and conceals his failure in reasoning by gaudy Middle American rhetoric.

Yet the failure of Cultural Literacy is the secret of its success. Though Hirsch's plan would limit and trivialize the education of the young and the re-education of some of the middle-aged, the banalities of a gerontocracy are welcome in the old age of Reagan and unreason. To Middle America, Hirsch offers the ideology of bureaucratized assent, disguised by the denial of ideology. He diverts attention from social realities and genuine social needs while assembling the pseudodoxia of middle-class middle-brows. Exxon approves. A work force a cut above the Reader's Digest and a cut below the Washington Post

should be able to read instruction manuals and willing to obey orders.

The pattern of my first three examples leads naturally to Ken Bruffee's "social constructionism" as my fourth and last. Though Bruffee does call his constructionism social, he asks no questions of the "prevailing culture" into which he obediently sets out to induct his students. On the contrary, he manages to say, and maybe to believe, that "collaborative learning" is an induction "into a culture in which democratic mores and values prevail," "one in which decisions about what to think and how to act grow out of a consensus of community members, arrived at through discussion and negotiation" (CE, January 1986, 77). Bruffee's excuse for blindness must be that knowledge is only that expressed consensus. If the state calls itself democratic, that abracadabra makes it a democracy.

Believers in a knowable reality who observe Bruffee's apparently non-negotiable demand that his students "agree to and accept" prevailing standards for written English will be less optimistic than he is. I will not repeat that the prevailing culture provides no opportunity for millions of young people to master the standard language. But when Bruffee announces that language and knowledge are identical and that "reality, . . . thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on"

are "linguistic entities" (CE, December 1986, 778, 774), I am left gasping at his arrogance. By changing his students' language, he must hope to change their deepest being, and for no other reason than to satisfy the demands which the community of the powerful makes on the communities of the weak.

Let me conclude my fourth example with a reductio. For Bruffee, knowledge reduces to the "consensus" of "the community of knowledgeable peers" (CE, December 1986, 779). In turn, "a community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (CE, November 1984, 642). It follows that the slaves whom my grandparents owned in mid-nineteenth-century Georgia were rightly slaves, that the Jews in Hitler's Germany indeed were monsters, and that the teaching of composition in our English departments is properly assigned to graduate students and underpaid part-timers, especially women. Ken Bruffee no more believes those things than I do, but I think he would have to believe them if he had not abandoned rationality for nose-counting.

So much for four examples of our function as Bruffee's "prevailing culture" sees it. By and large, the Profession does serve to provide employers with an adequate supply of brain<sup>2</sup>washed employees. But the qualification by and large

is essential.' Even Bruffee acknowledges (not without self-contradiction, so far as I can tell) that knowledge can grow "stale" and "unproductive" and that when it does , somebody must mysteriously escape the community's smothering consensus and rejuvenate its "normal" discourse with the "abnormal" (CE, November 1984, 648). My own discourse, I'm sure you've concluded, is wildly abnormal; but I'm also sure that the consensus of your knowledgeable peers supports my most hopeful belief. That belief is in the existence of thousands and thousands of sane, devoted teachers. They are not inevitably helpless. If they raise their voices and speak out, they may change some few things for the better; and if they would take the risk of moving from talk to action, they might accomplish even more.

My primary specific suggestion remains what it has been for some time: that we link abnormal action to abnormal discourse in a sustained attempt to break the prevailing system of exploitation in our own departmental culture--the exploitation of graduate students and part-timers, the general dislike for teaching composition, the general injustice to composition-teachers.'

That attempt, of course, would face the entrenched self-interest of the

tenured, the established literati. Even more frighteningly, it would face our whole damned and damning economic system--by which (to cite an outrageous instance) the University of Texas at Austin refuses ever to pay a tenured or tenurable composition staff yet can give millions and millions to the consortium known as the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation and to the robber-band of corporations called Sematech.

I know from bruising experience that such taxing and spending adversaries are inaccessible to rational conversation. Talking won't overcome their communities of knowledgeably grasping peers. Besides, they control access to the media of "all forms of public discourse." Concerted action to break that control must come before sane talking can even be heard. I am thinking, for example, of loud resignations by directors of exploited composition staffs, of equally loud refusals to fill the vacated directorships, of repeated teachers in lower-division courses, of well-publicized demonstrations by teachers of composition and their students and friends, of the occupation of offices of deans and presidents, of strikes and walkouts where unions exist.'

If such action did break the prevailing culture's limits on the thinkable and speakable, then proponents of humanely employed literacy might make a

successful populist appeal. Parents alarmed by talk of a "literacy crisis" might be even more alarmed if teachers could tell them, openly and strongly, how little the higher-education establishment really cares for general literacy among an informed and active majority.

The foolish dream of a risk-free emeritus, you say? I can't answer with much confidence.' Certainly my own timid and belated efforts at political action never got anywhere.' Maybe all a teacher of composition can do is to help the few students each term who happen to need what the teacher can offer at the time. I honor those who do that useful service. They are far better than cushioned professors who refuse to act against the iniquitous but still insist on talking, vainly, about its iniquity.' (How else but by such talk could we ever have so many conferences and coalitions?) Yet to say that my dream is foolish is to confirm and extend the uncomfortable proposition I began with: dominant professional attitudes not only guarantee but will continue to guarantee that the Profession cannot contribute to significant social change but helps instead and will keep helping to maintain the present unjust system of dominance and submission.

I wish our discourse community would help me to unbelieve that.